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## American Exceptionalism: Avoiding the Hazards

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## OPENING ADDRESS

# AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM: AVOIDING THE HAZARDS

ROBERT MERRY\*

Thank you, Beth. I have to say I'm overjoyed to be here at this institution, about which I knew very little until I got a phone call a couple months ago asking if I would participate in this symposium. It's also a pleasure to see Vice President Mondale, a man whom I covered in days of yore when I had a job that was more fun than my current job, I must say.

I bring you greetings from Washington D.C., a city about which it has been said: "where there's smoke, there're mirrors." We have been assigned a topic for today: American exceptionalism in the twenty-first century. I think it's a very timely and pertinent topic in terms of what's going on in the world today and in our country. So I welcome the subject, although I have to say that I have been known to bristle a bit at assigned topics on the basis that they remind me of the poor Washington bureau chief of the old *St. Louis Post Dispatch* of many decades ago who was accustomed to getting a wire from his editor, the imperious O.K. Bovard, with the words: "Have thoughts of following headline. Please supply story."

Now, in this instance, I have to say that I think American exceptionalism makes both a very good headline and in some ways, perhaps, a disturbing story. But it's an ideal subject for contemplation in this symposium. I suspect that any readers of my book in the audience might be sort of saying to themselves, "Oh, American exceptionalism. Well, I know that Merry's against that." And that would not be an altogether unfair supposition; it would not be altogether accurate, however. I have described the U.S. Republic as the greatest civic achievement in the history of mankind; I do believe that, and I do believe that's an expression of American exceptionalism of a kind.

But if America is the greatest civic achievement in the history of mankind, then I believe the second greatest achievement is the Roman Republic.

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The American Republic has lasted two centuries and a quarter; the Roman Republic lasted for five hundred years, the first four hundred of which were characterized by a remarkable degree of stability and civic success, the last hundred of which were characterized by an ongoing crisis of the regime, much of it manifesting itself in ways that were very brutal and bloody.

I believe that that crisis was brought on, incidentally, by stresses and strains domestically that emanated from Rome's imperial ambitions. I think it's also pertinent to note that our Founding Fathers were steeped in the history of the Roman Republic. Many of them knew this history in great detail, and in many ways they built our system upon some of the lessons and principles of that regime.

Among the things our American Founding Fathers adopted was the idea of limited powers of government officials put into check by so-called checks and balances. The consular imperium of Rome was, in part, a model for our own presidency. And bear in mind that few democracies in the world today have anything quite like our presidency. The Roman Senate served as a model for our Senate and the bicameral legislature of Rome served as a model. Rome did not have an independent judiciary, which our Founding Fathers viewed as a tremendous weakness in their system and led, in horrendous ways, to what we in our country today refer to as the politics of personal destruction.

I would note also that there are some amazing similarities in the development of the two republics and the milestones of the histories of each. Each began under monarchy; each grew fed up with the tyrannies of monarchy and thus threw over their kings. Each then crafted a delicate new system based on the principles of popular sovereignty. Each had, in the beginning, a rather narrow definition of popular sovereignty and then spent decades, even centuries, struggling to expand that definition.

Each consolidated its own natural territory through decades of expansion and then set out into the world. Each entered an epic foreign struggle to protect a weak ally from threatening aggressors. In the case of Rome, it was the Punic Wars against Carthage brought on by Carthage's threat against Sicily; in the case of America, it is what I call the wars to save Europe (1918–1989).

And each ultimately triumphed in that epic struggle largely because of greater mastery of technology and also because of the greater fealty and devotion to its own system of government, and then each found itself the lone superpower in a unipolar world.

These analogies are remarkable, and so I think it might be somewhat instructive to look back at what we might call Roman exceptionalism. I will begin in my effort to elucidate this with Lucius Cornelius Sulla. Sulla was a brilliant general who was of the generation just ahead of the Great Caesar. As a matter of fact, his contemporary, first his ally and then his great rival,

was Gaius Marius, the uncle of Gaius Julius Caesar. Sulla had a powerful personality and huge appetites and ambitions, and he was not above resorting to violence in the pursuit of those ambitions.

He sort of reminds me of Tony Soprano, actually, in a lot of ways. Sulla became one of the greatest tyrants of the Roman Republic. Bear in mind, I'm not talking about the period when Rome was ruled by emperors. I'm talking about the period between the kings and emperors, the five hundred years of the Republic.

He executed this tyranny in Rome; it was extremely bloody, and it's something to make us shudder, because Sulla wanted to reimpose the old ways and customs of Rome that were becoming very much eroded. And once the killing stopped, most historians believe that what Sulla reimposed onto the Roman polity was really quite brilliant. But it didn't survive, and soon Rome was moving back in the same direction in which it had been moving before.

But notwithstanding any of this, we know that Sulla was thoroughly imbued with the prevailing Roman view of Roman greatness and the origins of that greatness. And all this is captured in the magisterial historical novels of Colleen McCullough, the Australian writer. She wrote six volumes, each of about 600 pages, attempting to bring to life the last hundred years of the Roman Republic, this crisis of the regime that I talked about.<sup>1</sup>

Now, bear in mind that these works are fiction, but they are based on a prodigious study of Roman history—not just the battles and the issues in the Senate or the Plebeian assembly, but every aspect of Roman society, culture, customs, and social mores. All of these things come to life in Colleen McCullough's brilliantly researched and rendered historical novels. Most of the conversations obviously are made up, but they reflect the true sentiments of real people.

Now, we know from history that early in his career, Sulla took an army to the Euphrates River. He went east because there were some problems in Asia Minor as a result of a man that was kind of a thorn in the side of Rome by the name of Mithridates VI, Mithridates the Great, of Pontus. He was very much to Rome what Saddam Hussein might have been to us.

So Sulla took this army to the Euphrates, and then he crossed the Euphrates into the territory of the Parthians, who had an amazing civilization. The Parthians watched him closely, and if Sulla did anything provocative they were going to pounce on him, and he knew that. Sulla didn't do anything provocative; he asked for a parley with the Parthians of the Tigris area, the Tigris civilization. And he found himself, as a result, standing

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1. Colleen McCullough, *The First Man in Rome*, 1990; *The Grass Crown*, 1991; *Fortune's Favorite*, 1993; *Caesar's Women*, 1996; *Caesar*, 1997; *The October Horse*, 2002 (all published by William Morrow, New York).

before the satrap of the Seleucians, Orobazus, who answered only to the king of kings of Parthia.

And Colleen McCullough, knowing that this conversation took place, introduces a conversation between Orobazus and Sulla.<sup>2</sup> And, again, the conversation is made up but the sentiments are historically very, very accurate.

Orobazus greets Sulla by addressing him by his full name, as Lucius Cornelius Sulla. Sulla says to the king, "Lucius Cornelius will do," but Sulla himself takes pains to address Orobazus as Lord Orobazus, in keeping with the standing of this king in his own territory.

Then Orobazus errs again, addressing Sulla as "My Lord Lucius Cornelius." So Sulla corrects him again. He says, "Not My Lord Lucius Cornelius, just plain Lucius Cornelius. In Rome there are no lords and there are no kings."

Orobazus is puzzled. "We have heard it was so," he says, "but we find it strange. You do follow the Greek way, then. How is it that Rome has grown so great when no king heads your government?" Orobazus can understand about the Greeks: they'd never been great because they've never had a great king. They therefore split into factions and into smaller entities that ended up warring against one another. Whereas Rome, he says, acts as if there was a high king. "How can your lack of any high king permit such power, Lucius Cornelius?"

Sulla says, "Rome is our king, Lord Orobazus. We Romans subordinate ourselves to Rome and only to Rome. We bend the knee to no one human, any more than we bend to the abstraction of an ideal. Rome is our God, our king, our very lives."

He adds that when Romans strike for greatness, it is always in the name of Rome. The East, he says, sure, has kings. Greece had its ideals. "But we worship a place, Lord Orobazus. Men come and go, their terms on earth are fleeting. And ideals shift and sway, with every philosophical wind. But a place can be eternal as long as those who live in that place care for it, nurture it, and make it even greater."

Sulla offers himself as an example. He was not there on his own behalf but on the behalf of Rome: "If we strike a treaty, it will be deposited in the temple of Jupiter and there will remain. Not my property, not even bearing my name, a testament to the might of Rome."

McCullough has the Parthians who are gathered here listening rather rapt, but totally confused by what she calls a concept utterly alien. And Orobazus obviously considers it alien, too. He says, "But a place, Lucius Cornelius, is just a collection of objects. If a town, a collection of buildings;

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2. Colleen McCullough, *The Grass Crown* 272-79 (William Morrow & Co., Inc. 1991).

if a sanctuary, a collection of temples; or a countryside, a collection of trees and rocks and fish. How can a place generate such feeling, such nobility?"<sup>3</sup>

Sulla says, "For a while, Rome was actually ruled by kings until the men of Rome rejected the concept that a man can be mightier than the place which bred him. Now no Roman man is greater than Rome."<sup>4</sup>

Orobazus once again: "But the king is the manifestation of everything you say, Lucius Cornelius."<sup>5</sup>

Sulla: "No, a king cannot be. Kings use their countries to fuel themselves; Rome uses Romans to fuel herself."<sup>6</sup>

And at this point in the narrative, McCullough has Orobazus lifting his hands in what she calls the "age-old gesture of surrender" and saying, "I cannot understand what you say, Lucius Cornelius."

So Lucius Cornelius says, "Then let us pass to our reasons for being here today."<sup>7</sup> And he poses his thought that Rome should allow the Parthians to have total sway over all the territory east of the Euphrates. And Rome, because it needed to deal with Mithridates, should be able to have a sphere of influence in the territory west. And that, as history tells us, was the deal that was struck on that day.

Now, as I say, this conversation was obviously fictional, but the sentiments expressed were actually widely held beliefs by most Romans, probably almost all Romans, and in the case of Orobazus, by Eastern potentates. But Sulla's views, it would seem to me, are a distilled expression of what we might call Roman exceptionalism. And in it we can see elements similar to our own; we can see elements that are somewhat different also.

Clearly in our society, we're closer to the Greek model where ideals are significant in terms of underlying our beliefs in ourselves. And we have less of a sense of the grandeur of our polity, or at least that has been our tradition. We have more of a fealty than you would hear from an expression from Sulla or any Romans of his time to the concept of public opinion or the sentiment of the voters driving events. They didn't have that in Rome, but generally they're quite similar.

I would venture that the one great difference is this: that in Rome, in Sulla's Rome, in the minds of his contemporaries and his predecessors and his successors as long as the Roman Republic lasted (which wasn't very long after that), there was no hint of the view that other peoples of the world should or could adopt the Roman way.

What Sulla was saying is that the Roman way is for Romans, "it works for us." And implicit in that assumption was that Rome is exceptional in

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3. *Id.* at 274.

4. *Id.* at 275.

5. *Id.*

6. *Id.*

7. *Id.*

terms of its system of government; and if other countries attempt to adopt it and if they did, in fact, adopt it, then it would no longer be exceptional. Absolutely no sense of universality here, which is very different from America today, where we have, in our academies and in the media and among intellectuals and politicians, a very strong and growing current of thinking of America as representing the universal culture.

Strobe Talbott, when he was the Deputy Secretary of State in the Clinton years, referred to American foreign policy as being “consciously intended to advance universal values.”<sup>8</sup> Madeleine Albright, as Vice President Mondale noted, talked about the indispensable nation—“We stand tall and hence see further than other nations”<sup>9</sup>—which led her to believe that if the people of the Balkans could just adopt the American model, everything would be fine there. We have our current president talking in his second inaugural in quotes that are going to go down in history, in my view, about the growth of the democracy—how America will seek “the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.”<sup>10</sup> The concept would have been totally alien to Sulla.

So I find myself asking the question: What accounts for this distinction? Why did America largely embrace the idea that exceptionalism translated into universalism? Put another way: What is the underlying difference between the Roman sensibility, to use one example which I think is pertinent, and the American sensibility?

I believe that the fundamental difference boils down to a philosophical idea that has been percolating in the Western consciousness for the past eight hundred years. It goes by the name of the idea of progress, and it exerts a mighty tug and pull on Western thought and has since about the thirteenth century. So I’d like to talk about it a little bit.

As I say, it goes back to the thirteenth century and Roger Bacon and the first stirrings of recognition of the power of the scientific method, and how that scientific method can be used to accumulate knowledge and build knowledge upon previous knowledge.

I might note parenthetically here that many Muslim scholars and intellectuals today and many decades previous to today have argued that the thirteenth century was about the time that the West stole the scientific method from Islam.

But aside from that, and bringing us back to the West, whole books have been written about the idea of progress, and many intellectuals who

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8. Quoted in Samuel P. Huntington, *The Lonely Superpower*, 78 *For. Affairs* 35, 38 (Nov. 2, 1999).

9. Quoted in Robert W. Merry, *Sands of Empire: Missionary Zeal, American Foreign Policy and the Hazards of Global Ambition* 142 (Simon & Schuster 2005).

10. George W. Bush, Speech, *Second Inaugural Address* (D.C., Jan. 20, 2005) (reprinted in *Congressional Quarterly Weekly* (Jan. 24, 2005)).

have studied it believe that it is the single most significant animating doctrine—that is, the foundation stone for Western thinking about politics, about man and society, about culture, about history, about geopolitics.

Robert Nisbet, the famous humanities scholar who died a few years ago and who wrote a book in 1980 called *The Idea of Progress*, wrote this: “No single idea has been more important than, perhaps as important as, the idea of progress in Western civilization.”<sup>11</sup> And the concept expressed in that sentence is widely held.

The concept can be stated simply, notwithstanding its profound implications: the history of mankind as a species is the story of man’s slow, inexorable, steady rise from levels of cultural backwardness, folly, and blindness to ever higher levels of civilization and enlightenment, and then, as the doctrine is fully shaped, that this progress is part of the human condition and therefore it will continue. So long as man survives on this spheroid that we inhabit, progress will continue.

In one way, this can be viewed as really pretty simple, almost a truism. After all, it doesn’t take a philosopher to see that knowledge is cumulative, particularly scientific knowledge. It builds upon itself and as it does so, it has a huge impact on human comfort, if not the human condition.

It doesn’t take a philosopher to see that when horse-drawn transportation was replaced by steam, and steam by internal combustion engine, and that developed into jet propulsion, that that represented progress; or in the realm of physics, that the development from Ptolemy to Copernicus to Newton to Einstein certainly represented progress. And certainly all of that progress has a huge impact on the efficiencies of human existence.

But slowly over centuries, as it emerged and took on more and more underlying influence in guiding Western thought, the idea of progress took on two contradictions, I would argue, and what I call a mischievous corollary. The first contradiction is this: it concerns that element of the idea of progress that says that progress is part of the human condition and therefore it will continue forever as long as man resides on earth.

And long about the early eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth century, many scholars and thinkers and intellectuals and academics and not just a few crackpots found that this aspect of the idea of progress was leaving them rather cold because they were thinking to themselves: Where’s all this progress going? How do I know if it’s going to continue endlessly as long as man’s on earth? How do I know it’s not going to go to a bad place? How do I know it’s not going to become retrogression?

And that led a lot of these scholars and thinkers, et cetera, to sort of say no, no, no, I actually know where it’s going and I’m in a position to tell you where it’s going. They would say to their colleagues and to the people

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11. Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* 4 (Basic Books 1980).



who would read their writing: I'm in a position to tell you because where it's going happens to be my vision.

And this leads to utopianism and all manner of utopian views and attitudes and visions. It leads to all the utopian experiments that were conducted in Europe and America in the nineteenth century, it leads to Marxism and the classless society being the final endpoint. It leads to the Hegelian dialectic that is adopted by so many people who are interested in finding this and defining this final endpoint of history and various other gauzy human culminations.

Contradiction number two stems from the fact—and I believe it is an indisputable fact—that all of the progress that led Western man to conceive of the concept of progress turned out to be Western progress. It was really all about the fact that the West, from about 1500 onward, dominated the world. It dominated the world militarily, it dominated the world technologically, it dominated the world economically, it dominated the world in many ways intellectually and certainly in terms of its political and economic ideas, even ideals.

And the result was that a lot of these intellectuals who had embraced the idea of progress couldn't help noticing that, while they believed in the idea of progress and believed it was universal, there were still these other people like down south here and to the east who just didn't seem to be getting with the program. And they were going to have to get with the program, otherwise we're not going to be able to redeem this concept at all.

So how would they get with the program? Well, by embracing all of this progress that had been, in essence, Western progress, which meant that they had to become more like us. And this led to the idea of the West as being a universal culture, to the concept of Eurocentrism and its American cousin, American exceptionalism, the topic of our symposium today.

Robert Nisbet writes that the idea of progress was always essentially Eurocentric—had to be, because of the nature of the world during those centuries. And he says that by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries “the spell of the idea of progress—and the Eurocentric view of the entire world—had grown to such proportions that little, if anything, in the world could be considered in its own right. Everything had to be seen through the West and its own values.”<sup>12</sup> Implicit in this was that other cultures were essentially inferior and that universal progress required that they embrace Western values.

Briefly let me talk about the mischievous corollary. I think the mischievous corollary emerges when scholars and thinkers and intellectuals—you can see that I'm pretty skeptical of these people—begin to apply the concept of progress not just to the scientific, physical world but to human nature itself; to the idea that it's possible to structure laws and policies and

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12. *Id.*

governments in such a way as to actually improve, maybe even perfect, human nature. And if you can do that, if you can pull that off, then you indeed could ensure peace and tranquility and happiness throughout the world.

This concept emerged in the West largely in France in the late seventeenth into the eighteenth century. And it was the domain of the philosophes and encyclopedists who tilled the soil in which grew the French Revolution and what I consider to be its evil offspring, the Reign of Terror.

And for the last two centuries there's been a debate going on in the West. It's related to the idea of progress and other things, and it's a pivot point of conservatism versus liberalism. Conservatives tend to believe that human nature is immutable and, besides that, human nature contains seeds of evil, and that the structures and laws and policies of government should be ordered in such a way as to keep human nature in check. Whereas liberals, to one extent or another, have believed generally that human nature is malleable. And that's a fault line that's gone on and continues to go on in our country and in the West.

Now, I have to tell you that there's another competing view of history that is opposite or at least antipodal to the idea of progress. And it emerged in the West in the nineteenth century and quite powerfully in the twentieth century. I call it the cycles of history or the cyclical view of history. It's the view that history is not this inexorable progress of mankind to ever higher levels of enlightenment; but rather the story of distinct civilizations, each with its own culture, that have emerged, developed, flowered, and then inevitably declined.

The two great exponents from the twentieth century of this view of history were Oswald Spengler, the German, and Arnold J. Toynbee of Britain. It's important to note that these two men, in terms of their political views or their philosophical views, were totally opposite—they didn't see eye to eye on anything. But in terms of their view of how history unfolds, what drives history, they had views that were remarkably similar.

What's the underlying difference, then, between the idea of progress and the so-called cyclical view? In a word it's culture. Those in today's society, whether they know it or not, whose view of the world is animated primarily by the idea of progress tend to devalue the role and significance of culture in driving historical events, particularly geopolitical events.

Those who buy into the foundation of the cycles of history tend to emphasize cultures as significant determinants in ongoing history. And I think that Toynbee said it very well from the cyclical side when he talked about "the misconception of the 'unity of history' . . . involving the assump-

tion that there is only one river of civilization, our own, and that all others are tributary to it or else lost in the desert sands."<sup>13</sup>

Now, let's look at the Bush foreign policy as applied to the Middle East. First of all, it's very clear that Bush believes that we are at a final culmination point in history, that the spread of democracy into the Middle East is going to be one of those pivotal developments in history. I do believe that he believes we will reach an endpoint, and that when we succeed in this—I don't believe he thinks this anymore or his people do, but I think he did when he went into Iraq—that we will actually reach a culmination, and peace will reign because these people will adopt the American model. Well, clearly that's contradiction number one. That's a utopian vision.

It also is contradiction number two because it basically is based fundamentally on the universalism of American exceptionalism, of the American model, and they must and will embrace the Western model because it is universal.

And I would argue that there are elements of the mischievous corollary here, too. What he's saying is that these are people who, notwithstanding their centuries and centuries of cultural sensibilities and their development of cultural impulses and ideas and feelings and thoughts and fears, that these are going to be eradicated as soon as they adopt American democratic capitalism or at least Western democratic capitalism. And I believe that the very idea that you can basically run over those long cultural traditions and alter behavior is an element of the mischievous corollary.

Now, power is like water in any polity: water always finds its lowest level, power always finds its outer limits. But in the world today, because human nature is human nature, in almost all instances power has to have a justification for its expansion, unlike water which just uses gravity for its justification. And our justification under George Bush is the idea of progress.

I will note that Rome had no idea of progress. As a matter of fact, the idea of progress is a distinctly Western view. There was no idea of progress of any consequence in classical society. There's no concept of the idea of progress in Islam or in the Far Eastern civilization, which I call the Sinic civilization, or in Hindu. It's a distinctly Western view.

J.B. Bury, who was a British classical historian and who wrote a book about the idea of progress, said that among the ancients, as he called them, there was a view that humanity actually was retrogressing as civilization became more sophisticated, that there had been a "golden age" of simplicity from which man had fallen away.<sup>14</sup> It's almost the opposite in that man, in

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13. Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History* 36–37 (Oxford U. Press 1947) (abridgment of volumes I–VI by D.C. Somervell).

14. J.B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Growth and Origin* 135 (Dover Publications 1955) (first published in England by Macmillan & Co. in 1920).

the classical centuries, venerated the world he could see and tended to resist change.

He said that “they would idealize the immutable as possessing a higher value[,]” and they were always directed and guided by what they called the *moira*.<sup>15</sup> It’s a concept that continued into Roman sensibility. It’s often translated in the West as fate, but it’s really much more than that. It’s a concept of the realities of the universe, much bigger than anything we can see here, to which Man must give recognition and resignation and acceptance.

So the idea of human progress towards any kind of perfection was really kind of a heresy among ancient people. Says Bury: “Human nature does not alter, it’s fixed by *moira*.”<sup>16</sup> So the rationale for the expansion of Rome turned out to be the glory of Rome, as we could detect in McCullough’s rendition of the way Sulla would have talked on the Euphrates.

In the United States, at the beginning of the post-war period, the rationale is the idea of progress, and it came to the fore very powerfully with the end of the Cold War and, I think, the intoxication that emerged in America—in the West generally—regarding that glorious victory over the Soviet threat.

It came forward in a number of famous essays and writings, but I’ll note just two because they were extremely influential and continue to be to this day. In 1989, Francis Fukuyama, the academic, wrote an essay in *National Interest* magazine called “The End of History?” with a question mark at the end of it.<sup>17</sup> Later he wrote a book and removed the question mark.<sup>18</sup> In this essay, he said that Western democratic capitalism represented the culmination of mankind’s civic development. He said we had reached the end of history. That was a phrase from Hegel, by the way, and Hegel is one of the most powerful exponents of the idea of progress throughout its mult-century development in the West.

It was all over because the ideological struggle of the world had reached absolute finality, and this was going to have profound impact on world peace because, after all, we no longer had these things to fight over which man had fought over for so many centuries. He said that this new society, we had to recognize, might be somewhat boring because there wouldn’t be so many things that we would want to fight over or die over. And he said, sure, there would be holdouts, especially holdouts from the people who were sort of clinging to the old Communist nostrums in such places as North Korea and Cambridge, Massachusetts. But by and large, he said, this was really what the world was going to be like.

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15. *Id.* at 11, 18–19.

16. *Id.* at 19.

17. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History?* 16 *Natl. Interest* 3 (Summer 1989) (special reprint).

18. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press 1992).

And consider this language, this quote: He referred to the “universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”<sup>19</sup> And there you have it, in just about eleven words, the two contradictions of the idea of progress: Eurocentrism and utopianism.

Then about ten years later, Thomas Friedman, the famous *New York Times* columnist—a brilliant reporter when he was in Washington and overseas covering foreign affairs (I happen to believe he’s a less brilliant columnist)—wrote a best-selling book called *The Lexis and the Olive Tree*,<sup>20</sup> which glorified what he called the new era of globalization in which the flow across borders of ideas and capital and technology and information and people was going to create a global convergence of politics, economics, and culture.

And what was this convergence going to be like? What was it going to look like? What would it be? Well, it was going to be the American model. He referred to America as the ultimate benign hegemon. I write in my book that there’s no such thing as a benign hegemon because any hegemon will find that, to remain a hegemon, it is going to end up getting into very bloody situations, and that if it wants to be a hegemon, it can no longer be benign.

But Thomas Friedman believed that America, in 1999, was going to emerge as the ultimate benign hegemon and was going to foster this culmination of cultural development into the American model globally. He also believed that this was going to have a profound impact on world peace. So once again, we have the idea of progress and its two contradictions.

I believe—and I write in my book—that the idea of progress is what has led us astray, and the big reason for that is because it minimizes the role of culture in driving geopolitical events. And given the influence of such writings and thinking as manifested in Fukuyama and Friedman and many, many others, it has been in total ascendance in terms of the political discourse in America involving geopolitics. I believe that’s changing largely because of the failure of Iraq, and I agree with Vice President Mondale on that.

But meanwhile, one of the reasons I sat down to write my book at the very end of the Iraqi invasion, at the beginning of the occupation, was because I didn’t think there was really any debate about this. I didn’t believe that Americans were really engaging in any serious discourse; here was this profound transformation in American thinking about America’s role in the world, and it was generating so little debate.

I believe that the idea of progress brought forth the Wilsonian humanitarian liberal interventionism that was part and parcel of the Clinton years. I think it also influenced George Herbert Walker Bush’s decision to send

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19. Fukuyama, *supra* n. 17, at 4.

20. Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexis and the Olive Tree* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux 1999).

28,000 troops into Somalia with absolutely no pretense of any relationship to America's national interests.

Certainly in the Bush administration, as the former Vice President said as well, it served as a rationale of idealism underpinning what is essentially a hegemonic impulse—the idea of America dominating the world to the fullest extent possible as far into the future as possible in the name of American ideals.

But ideals are not universal. Islam is a far different culture with far different cultural impulses based on a far different cultural history. And that's the downside, the underbelly of American exceptionalism, when it leads to the concept that we can spread our own values around the world.

So, yes, to that extent, I do oppose American exceptionalism, and I fall back on what I consider to be one of the great quotes of the early part of our Republic by John Quincy Adams when he captured and understood all of this going into centuries. He said, "America is the well wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own."<sup>21</sup>

Wise words, in my view. Thank you very much.

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21. John Quincy Adams, Speech, *To the U.S. House of Representatives on Foreign Policy* (July 4, 1821) (available at the Miller Center of Public Affairs (Scripps Library & Multimedia Archive), [http://millercenter.virginia.edu/scripps/diglibrary/prezspeeches/jqadams/jqa\\_1821\\_0704.html](http://millercenter.virginia.edu/scripps/diglibrary/prezspeeches/jqadams/jqa_1821_0704.html)).